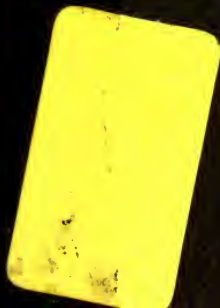


UC-NRLF



\$B 251 706



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA.

GIFT OF

Pres. Wheeler

Class

958
515

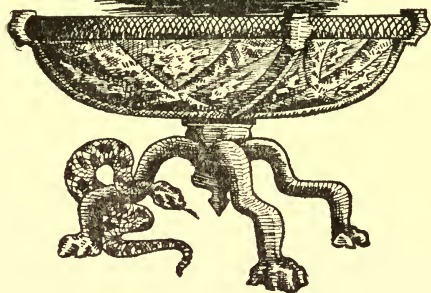
Ashes

ASHES

by

Stanley Richardson

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANCES OLDENDORF



P5 3535
I34 A8
1912
MA 112

"The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two—was gone."

—*The Rubáiyát.*

To My Father

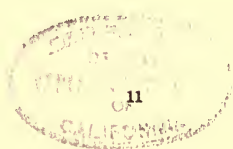
“**W**HAT of the lofty ambition—
WHAT of the high resolve— [future
WHEN the game is fixed. Leave the
TO Fate and the Devil to solve.
FORGET all the weary struggle—
THE killing, fruitless test.
‘**O**, WE’VE All Gone Wrong’
IS a rollicking song ;
AND it helps you forget—the rest.”

—From *The Song of the Slide*.



"The Hope that we once looked upon."

(See page 45)




ASHES

Contents

	PAGE
The Fool	19
Smoke	43
The Breaking of Corbin	47
The Steel and the Clay	59
The Turn of a Card	65

The Fool



The Fool

("But the fool, he called her his lady fair—
Even as you and I."—*Kipling*.)

As I sit here in the shadows to-night,
watching the fire-imps writhe and
scowl and burn in my grate, all of it
comes back to me again—as it has and
will, so many and many times that I
wonder if I may ever forget, even
when I go to join the man whose face
is the center around which it all burns
itself in my thoughts. Outside there
is the same clear cold night that he
left so long ago, and the same little
snapping stars that looked down then,
when his heart broke—the big, boyish
heart that had shown itself so true and
pure to me his friend—and I knew.

From over the mantle his picture looks down at me while I write;—not the devilish thing that I took to the woman, but his old picture. Every night I sit here beneath it and look up at the wide serious eyes and the strong mouth—the face of my friend before the eyes became hard and weary and hopeless, and the boyish lips tightened into the cynical smile that I hated.

How hard it is to write the story, now that I have begun. After all, he was only one of hundreds before him; and the shadow that has left him in an unmarked foreign grave and me in a dead life of memories has touched and broken men since the world began—and will up to the end. Help me to write it as it was, Old Pal—the jumble

and snarl that Fate made of two lives,
—and I hope to God of three.

* * * * *

There wasn't much in the setting of that first scene to tell of the tragedy which was to unfold from it. The Boy was back from Yale in his home town—back with the Girl. Up on the hill away from the wide, quiet streets Her house stood, hemmed about by the big elms he had always associated with Her. Before the dimly lighted door stood a tall figure, nervously fumbling with the door-bell. The Boy turned to look out at the silvery lawn with the sharp black shadows from the elms cutting it into weird patterns. Home—and the Girl! He threw back his head with a low, happy laugh,—and

slowly the door swung open and She came out. An hour later they still sat on the old divan, screened by the honeysuckle that threw a fragrant wall between the porch pillars. The Girl was talking gaily, but on the Boy's face a little puzzled frown had chased away the happiness. At last the broad shoulders straightened, and he leaned quickly toward the Girl and kissed her. But two little cool hands were against his face,—pushing him away, and a cool voice was saying—"Now don't be silly. You must never do that again—never."

Something seemed to snap inside the Boy's head, and he pulled himself to his feet, with a strange dull ache around his eyes, and a red haze blurring the

streaming moonlight around him and the Girl. How well I, to whom he told the story of that evening, can imagine the hurt look on his face—I, who loved him. I can hear the new bitterness in the young voice as he laughed—the bitterness that clouded his wide, trusting eyes and deadened his heart in the months that were to come. Somewhere inside the house a girl was singing—Her sister—and the words floated out to him in sweet, distant waves.

“In the dear Home land, far across the sea,—
How I wondered was it Spring time where
I longed to be—”

“The dear Home land !” A ray of moonlight struggled through the honeysuckle and glorified the fair head at his side; and the Boy shivered slightly,

then turned and stumbled slowly down the broad steps and on toward the street—and out of her sight. Back on the moon-flecked porch a slim figure in white leaned against a pillar and watched him go, and within a fresh girlish voice sang on: — “The dear Home land.”

* * * * *

The fierce eastern sun blazed down on the brilliant green jungle growth of mid-summer Luzon, and sparkled hot on the rifles of a little bunch of brown-clad men, tramping through the cane. At intervals a flash of color showed above the green, fluttering and flapping in folds of red and white—the flag for which these men were throwing on the gambling table of war all that they

had of strength and health—of will and life.

For a month now the Boy and I had been with them—and he had been always the same. Whenever the guns of the little brown men had crackled around us, in the jungle or from some low hill, he had fought like a devil,—with a reckless fury and bravery that made me almost worship while I pitied him. But never, when the rifles were spattering and spitting lead all around him, did the cool blue eyes light up. Always they were the same, hopeless and infinitely weary, and with a great longing behind them. After his corporal's stripes had come, as they had been sure to from the first mix-up with the insurgents, the Boy had

glanced at them with a short laugh and had turned to me, looking so tired and broken that I choked as I tried to speak and congratulate him. "Why can't I get what I want, old pal?" he said. "These, when all I'm hunting for is one of the little steel points that come all around me, but never hit." And then, after a long silence, I heard him muttering to himself — "Never hit— never hit."

A month to-day since we had landed in Manila, and it seemed a year. As I pushed on, gripping with one moist hand the heavy gun that jarred my tired shoulder, I looked ahead at the Boy crashing along with his squad. The broad shoulders stooped a little now, and the old careless swing was

gone. Panting and sweating and always trudging and stumbling over the broken cane I fell to dreaming of what had been—before *this*. Instead of the burning sweltering calm of the air, a little breeze off the river was brushing my cheek while I strolled down the elm shaded New Haven street to the field where the Boy was playing with the team. Perched high on the bleachers, I had sat and smoked and watched him. How many times I had seen the big shoulders stiffen and smash through the line opposite, driven by the will that showed in the square tightened jaw:—the will that had carried him through all, and that I knew would carry him through this — until he dropped at the end. My foot chunked

into a hidden mud hole, and I shifted the eternal rifle, cursing its bruising weight in a discouraged tone. How little this evil weapon appreciated the choice and highly descriptive adjectives with which I had favored it in the past! Ahead the shoulders of squad three's big corporal still filled my outlook,—the shoulders and what hung between them, bouncing and slapping against the broad back. It was a kodak case, strapped around under the Boy's arms, the shiny black of the leather blurred with dust. Marching or fighting, eating or sleeping — he always carried it; and now the thing fascinated me with its polished clasp leering like an evil eye from a long gray face. In spite of the heat I shivered and mut-

tered more caressing remarks to my rifle—pearls thrown before swine. If the damn gun would only answer back!

Stumbling and slipping on the cane stalks, panting and sweating, the men in brown went on; and with them the Boy and I and the black case swinging and bumping against the dusty blue flannel shirt and streaking it with little spurts of thicker dust. And always the sun and the choking heat, and the shake and pound of the rifle's weight on my aching shoulder.

* * * * *

Load and aim and fire — and load again. The quick reaching to the cartridge case at my belt, the snap of the shell into the heated breech, the steady shifting of the barrel until the blurred

sights rested upon one of the moving white spots below,—and then the familiar concussion and crash against my hot cheek. Again and again—and all around me men were going through the same automatic actions. Between the broken shocks of the firing I could hear the heavy breathing of the man beside me as he shifted his rifle to his left shoulder and dragged his body a little further ahead. It was the Boy, stretched flat on his stomach like the rest of us, and pumping two shots to my one into the creeping, shifting force in the trees below. Emptying the magazine and jerking out the still smoking last shell, I fumbled on my hip for the next clip. I looked at him—and as it happened the narrowed blue eyes caught mine,

and the close shut lips parted in a little smile, the ghost of the old happy grin that I had almost forgotten on his face. And then my reaching hand found my cartridge belt and I was once more only a machine, working as a unit in the long line of prostrate men to the ultimate end that, whether the machine held together or was shattered, the dusty, precious silk hanging on the pole behind us should still catch the salute of the foreign sun and the touch of the faint hot breeze, with American hands to raise it and American guns to keep it sacred.

* * *

Twenty minutes later it was all ended. The Filipino attack was broken, and caught from behind by a flanking party from B Company, which had

been several miles behind us in this little analyzing expedition, the natives scattered like rabbits through the jungle with the cheerful cracking of American rifles hurrying them on both sides, and now and then changing some dodging white shape into a very still and quiet mass huddled in the green cane. With a deep breath I rubbed my singed cheek with one sun-burned wrist, rose stiffly to my feet, and turned to the Boy. "Damn good little fight, wasn't it — —" and there my well meant remarks stopped, broken off as by some clanging blow from a great sledge. A moment later I was kneeling in the hill dust beside what had been my friend, aimlessly smoothing the close-cut fair hair, now wet and sticky. With my

tongue licking my dry lips I put my arm around the limp waist and lifted, until the shoulders moved and the head lurched back against my breast—and I saw. Squarely between the wide open, horrible eyes was a round black hole. The Boy had found what he sought.

And then, with the Luzon sun slanting across the stretch of green to the west, I did as I had been told, carrying out to the end the instructions of the dead boy, even as I had sworn to him by our friendship. If my act seems gruesome and inhuman, it was what he had wished, and to it I was bound. If to you, carelessly reading of what happened thousands of miles away to men unknown to you, it seems these things—think of my feeling, when I loved

him. With shaking hands I unstrapped the black case from his back, my fingers wet with his blood, and drew out the kodak—its fresh grained leather and polished nickel weirdly out of place amid the worn dusty outfit of a dead soldier.

This I shall write quickly. Propping the inert form against the little mound over which it had fought, I stepped back and focussed the machine. And with the sunlight full on the staring blue eyes and what was between, I steadied my shaking hands—and in the wave of dizziness that came upon me, heard the single sharp click as I gripped the bulb.

* * * * *

It was a year later. The passing

months had left the Home Town much the same as when the Boy had gone. The house of the big cool elms and the wide porch looked at the quiet town below with the same calm indifference as before. The only change was that now the air held the soft languorous warmth of a June morning, and the shadows from the elms fell on the green lawn in light wavering shapes. Up the wide walk a man stepped, his browned face contrasting oddly with the straw hat and white silk shirt. In his gray summer suit he still walked with the swing of the Service—never forgotten by those who have served. Under his arm he carried a small square package, tied with narrow black ribbon; and in his heart

he carried the memory of what he had seen and done—the memory that after ten months still hurt as only memories can. I know—for I was the man. Almost like one in a dream he stood by the doorway, only half conscious of the music within, although it beat and throbbed in his ears like a symphony woven and colored with all the pain and heartache of the world.

He looked full in the face of the beautiful girl that opened the door, and with a murmured word of inquiry handed her the white package—white save for the narrow silk band that crossed and recrossed it. Then he lifted his hat, turned, and swung down the path as he had come, looking straight ahead and walking very rap-

idly. As the girl watched him a look of surprise crossed her face, for down at the end of the walk the man stopped before turning towards town and quickly rubbed his right hand with his handkerchief and then strangely enough stooped and very carefully dusted his shoes. After he had disappeared she noticed that he had dropped the handkerchief where he stood, and wondered for a moment how he could do so without noticing it. And then she looked down at the package in her slim white hands, nervously snapped the slender ribbon and tore away the many folds of tissue paper.

As the moonlight had fallen through the twining honeysuckle that last night she had seen the Boy, the sun

today was striking between the elms, touching the wavy hair and soft cheek with burning hot fingers and dazzling the glass in her hand. Wonderingly she looked, seeing first the dull black of the wide frame, and then the almost perfect print which it enclosed. Little by little the delicate pink left the cheek under the wavy hair, until, pale as the face of the dead boy in the picture, she swayed and almost fell. There was a crash and the tinkle of broken glass, and the girl stared dully at the sparkling bits scattered at her feet; at the wide black frame which lay there unharmed. And the eyes in the picture stared back at her from the floor, stared at her and through her;

unseeing, calm eyes, set in the face of a dead American soldier.

Little breaths of wind rustled among the elm leaves and stirred the crumpled paper behind her—but the girl did not move. Out into the beauty of the summer day the clear voice from the house floated, fresh and sweet as when she and the Boy had sat in the long, happy evenings and heard it.

“In the dear Homeland, far across the sea;—
How I wondered, did they miss me, did they
think of me — — —”

With a little moan the girl covered her eyes with the slim white hands—cool hands.

Smoke

Smoke

In the soft half haze of the twilight,
When the sky is gold in the west—
The cares of the day are forgotten
In the blue smoke cloud of rest.

Wreathing and twining and curling
Around and about and above—
The shadowy haze holds the mem'ries
Of happiness, pain—and of love.

Dreams of the days that have left us—
Thoughts of the hours that are gone—
Lines from the bitter-sweet story
Of the hope that we once looked upon:—

Slowly they float through the smoke cloud,
Till the first dim-shining star
Mirrors the light that invoked them—
The gleam of a half-smoked cigar.

The Breaking of Corbin

The Breaking of Corbin

The coach gave a disgusted grunt. All through the weary weeks while the big squad was being sifted and sifted, his cue had been to be disgusted, and now the habit was too strong to break. As the tired bunch of blue-sweatered men forced itself into a slow trot—the last effort between it and the end of the day's work—the coach smiled. It was a very little smile, and more grim than pleasant, but it meant many things. It meant that this, the last secret lineup, showed the completion of his long scheming and worry. It meant that the maker of a Yale team had looked on his finished work, and that the sight of it was good. And it meant that out

of the mob of good, bad and indifferent ends a man had been developed to fill the one big hole in the blue line.

Briefly stated, it was this way. After the first few weeks of sorting and crude choosing the coach began to find himself losing sleep, and the official frown had grown deeper and deeper; and the unfortunates trying for right end had grown more and more nervous. End after end had been picked to pieces and coached, despaired of—and sworn at.

And out of all this hammering there had been evolved Corbin. And so, as the November sunset brightened the jogging, mud-stained sweaters now pounding past the little knot of coaches and on across the field to where the big gate was slowly creaking open, the

head coach smiled again. For, leading the squad of panting, sweating men, a tall figure caught his eye, and with the memory warming his heart of a lanky body driven along by the stride he had come to watch and gloat on, the head coach followed his team from the field.

* * * * *

The late morning sun slanted into the training house windows, mocking the recreant elms which raised leafless arms in protest. Slowly its rays crept over the floor in a corner room—the room of Dick Corbin. At last they fell on the couch by the door and lit up the dark brown head on the pillow. Higher and higher they stole, and still the head did not move. With wide open, unseeing eyes Corbin lay there, trying

to piece together what had happened the night before. And then, trembling like a leaf, he threw off the covers and sat up. Five, ten—twenty minutes—and the big form on the edge of the bed had not stirred. With his hands over his face, Corbin, of the Yale Varsity, was sobbing like a child. He remembered it all now: the solitary stroll after dinner—the bar he had entered for a little cooling ginger ale—and then the unforgivable thing. He remembered less clearly the stern face of the trainer as he had seen it in the doorway; the awful walk back to the training quarters; the set, amazed looks of his teammates. Someone had whispered, “Corbin’s drunk,” and after that everything was blurred. The words

kept hammering inside his brain now, in hissing, terrible syllables, "Corbin's drunk, Corbin's drunk—drunk—drunk," until at last he sprang to his feet. "My God! How could I do it!" he almost cried aloud; and still the accusing words throbbed in his ears, growing to a muffled roar. Every minute the reality of it grew plainer to him, and with it came realization of what it meant—lost reputation, lost friends and lost honor in the college world, which was *his* world. The man standing there was a different Corbin from the tired, happy one of the day before, and as his eyes wandered over all the details of the little room they, too, seemed different, as if they were no longer a part of his life, but belonged to some other

man—some man that he had known long before.

Suddenly all the sunshine in the room seemed to be caught on the dresser at the window, gleaming and dancing on the silver oval of a frame that stood there among the heavy brushes. The girl's face within it looked at him as from a circle of fire, meeting his eyes so squarely that Corbin caught his breath. He crossed the room and took the picture in his hand, and very carefully and tenderly he laid it face downward on the couch. The tall form whose speed and smashing tackles had set Yale rooters mad with delight in every game of the season was moving rapidly now—dressing with nervous haste. The thick, rumpled hair was

brushed hurriedly, the strong brown hands trembling still. From under the bed they jerked a battered suitcase, and then began rapidly to fill it.

For a minute Corbin stopped and closed his eyes. Hung over the back of a chair was a heavy blue sweater, and there came to him the thought of the many and many nights when, aching and tired in every muscle, he had dreamed of the big white Y that should some day be on it. Well, Dick Corbin was then a Varsity certainty, and now — he must hurry. With that dull ache always pounding at his temples he wrapped thick folds of the sweater around the silver frame and savagely tightened the straps of the bulging suitcase.

At last he could go. Somewhere—anywhere — it did not matter. He crushed his hat low on his forehead and stepped quickly to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned and looked back. The sunlight was still streaming in at the wide-open window. Through the branching arms of the old elm outside he could see the blue sky—Yale blue. And something was gripping at his throat and filling his eyes with tears. For a moment he stood there, and then softly opened the door and stumbled out into the hall.

The Steel and the Clay

The Steel and the Clay

Side by side, where the road began—

From the Hope-kissed gate of Life—

Two men set out, with their faces set,

Strong for the risk and toil to be met—

Strong for the crushing Strife.

One went forth, full well equipped

With wealth, and the help of the wise.

But to some who looked, with the Power to seek,

The light in his face showed false and weak—

Weak showed the Soul in the eyes.

The other fought with his empty hands,

Alone on the long, lone Trail:—

But his eyes were deeper than Heaven's blue,

And the light from his Heart was pure and true

And fierce as the northern gale.

The years slipped by, and the Start of the Road
Was lost to the 'Toilers' sight:—
But the Voice of the World still drove its own,
Called with a cry that was half a moan,—
Called through the seething fight.

Crowned with the tinsel of mortal fame,
Raised high by the Gain of Gold,—
The first man died—and the watchers wept:
But his eyes were closed, and forever slept
The secret Shame they had told.

Deep in the hills of an untamed land
Where the gamble of life runs wild,
A bullet crashed through a braver brain,
And the deep, true eyes were shattered by
pain,—
But they flashed at the end—undefiled.



The Turn of a Card

The Turn of a Card

Outside it was cold—bitter cold. Within the little room it was very cold too, and dark. It was a quiet little room, this, strangely quiet; and over by the wide window stood a man, his forehead pressed against the frosted glass. On him too the quiet and the cold of the winter outside seemed to have settled, holding the vaguely outlined figure motionless and tense. The man—for his name does not matter—was bending over something white in his hand, straining his eyes to catch what little light fell upon it; and while the last discouraged signs of the day touched the letter and the set face above it, he read. Suddenly, with a

low sound that might have been either a curse or a groan, he crumpled the paper in one hand and then with a quick, almost savage motion tore it across, again and again, until his hands were filled with tiny white flakes, as if a few of the millions swirling against the window had found a breach in the glass barrier and fought their way in. And the man must have thought of this too, for as the flakes of paper fluttered and fell from his opened fingers to the floor, he stared at the fast blackening window and muttered "Cold as the snow."

And then it was almost dark. But over by the window a black form that seemed one of the heavy shadows of the little room still leaned by the cold

pane, and if the snowflakes clinging to the ledge just outside had peered in, they might have seen the pair of broad shoulders so close to them shaking strangely, and two strong, trembling hands cover the white face against the pane. But it was really so dark in the little room that I hardly think they saw. Perhaps they heard, between the moans of the north wind that had brought them there, the remark that again broke the dead quiet of the little room: "Damn the snow!"

For an hour almost the little room lay in darkness, with never a sound save the low weary wail of the wind and the soft brush of the snow driving past the window. At last a light flared up, crowding the blackness back

into the corners. The man nursed the flickering match in the hollow of his hand—the strong hand that still trembled a little. And somehow the man's face seemed older than before, and more drawn—but the light was very dim.

Groping along the burlap-covered wall, he found the button, and with the sharp click of the connection, the little room was flooded with light. For a moment he stood there blinking in the new glare, and then sank back on the broad couch, heaped with a gay profusion of cushions, nearly all of them bright with the green of his college—Dartmouth green. As one who is very tired the man leaned back

among them, and slowly reached up to the fantastic pipe-rack above his head. As he crammed the tobacco down in the charred briar bowl, he looked very much a man, tall and broad shouldered with the careless grace that seems born with some. And he sat there now, not a hero nor a personification of masculine beauty, but just a plain American college man. The dark, heavily lashed eyes that stared fixedly at the pictures on the opposite wall might have been capable of twinkling with fun or blazing out with anger, but now they were simply tired, with the look lurking in them that comes into the big innocent eyes of a hurt animal sometimes. Why describe this man as big-hearted, cool and brave,

when now all that he felt himself to be was—tired.

Soon long spirals and puffs of gray smoke clouded the man's face, and if now it did look older than in the part-light of the evening, it might have been the smoke. With the pipe stem firmly clenched between his teeth, the man was thinking—trying to build up anew the broken and tumbled mass that had been his Castle of Dreams, and succeeding but little. Down in the heart's heart of every real man there always is guarded this stronghold, its marvelous towers and wonderfully fair walls holding the hopes and unvoiced longings of his being and his life—the truest and purest thoughts of his manhood. And when

the Castle of Dreams is shaken and falls, what is left is but ashes, dead as the cold gray powder that the man knocked slowly from his pipe, and which scattered itself on the thick green carpet even as his Dream Towers had scattered their ruins in his heart. Burned out ashes and ruined dreams—how alike they are, with the fire which is the Life extinguished. Cold as the snow, and dead as the ash, how many and many a strong brave heart has broken with the passing of the fire.

Pocketing the still warm pipe, the man rose to his feet and walked quickly to the heavy oak study table under the clustered lights; and after searching awhile among the books that littered its green top, picked up a pack

of cards. Bending them nervously in his hands, he shuffled the pasteboard slips, and with a little grim smile drew out one card and laid it face down on a big much-worn law book.

As he reached out to turn it, he hesitated, a half frightened and altogether drawn look on the clean-cut young face. There was a new light in the wide-set eyes, a flicker that seemed to come from some depth far back in them, and that was like the shimmer of heat waves over white-hot iron—forced and metallic and hard. There was resolution in the eyes, and a reckless determination different from the almost vacant weary stare of a few minutes before.

So, very manly and straight as he

stood regarding the back of the card he had drawn, the man thought out with a final questioning his future, and reached again the resolve that had come to him as he smoked.

With a last clear, searching gaze at the ruined Castle, he forced himself to an even fuller realization of what it meant to him. And if in this he was shaken with the dizzy infinite pain that has come to some, nay, many, as they have viewed in their hearts that to which the dark eyes now fully opened; was he not a man, with the splendid youthful strength that might endure all things, even as a man should endure. And the strained and twisted steel holds to the end without breaking, for in that is the tempering

shown. In a quiet, level voice the man spoke, stating to himself the things that hung on the flip of the glazed card before him, spoke, as if he were a little afraid to trust to the silence of his own resolve, the enforcing of the decision of the card. "If it is red, I stay the term out here; and then—and then back home and try to *make* her care. Try with all that there is in me—try once more. If this card is black, I shall leave here tomorrow. West and west and west—until I find the life which shall make me forget. And God help me."

With these words he looked slowly around the little room, seeming to call all the familiar things, the intimate surroundings of his college life, to

witness his word—a man's word—and not to be broken. Then he leaned forward and turned the card, calmly and without hesitation. It was the nine of clubs.

Not a muscle quivered in the lean, pale cheek as the man carelessly shoved the black card between the leaves of the law book, and not a finger shook as he reached for his tobacco and carefully rolled a cigarette. Surely, the dim evening light of two hours back had been deceptive, for the shoulders under the quilted silk smoking jacket weresquare and broad—and motionless. But the drifted snow banks of the North are broad, and the quietest shoulders are those of the dead—quiet after the going of the Fire.

Over by the high dresser there hung a certain framed picture, and as it happened, the man's eyes, roving around the room, lit and rested upon it. Very small and unpretentious, the picture was of a girl's head, done in black and white, which carried out in the words beneath it the cynical fancy of a quibbled phrase—

“The light that lies in woman's eyes,
And lies—and lies—and lies.”

But as he caught sight of it the deep flicker in the man's eyes suddenly blazed out into something crueller and very bad to see. The heavy brass paper-weight on the table beside him drove through the air, and in the crash of broken glass, the girl's face on the wall crumpled with the cracked card-board. Then the flash died away, and

the man began doing what was to be done.

And just before he switched off the lights and jerked open the window, and when the cold night was slipping into the new day, he took one long look at the little room — his little room. The air was heavy and close with stale tobacco smoke, which somehow blurred his eyes in a way unusual to smoke. In one corner rose the monument of his work of the past few hours — two bulging suitcases piled on a battered steamer trunk. Around the walls the same old pictures, one of them broken and spoiled, still hung, and the old green carpet still covered the floor. But over by the window there was a splotch of white against

the green—the white of paper torn into tiny pieces. On the table a deck of cards was scattered over the cover of a big book, and powdered across the gayly tinted red and black figures lay a line of ashes.

* * * *

Where the thick walls of a different race encircle the Imperial City, where the ages-old traditions of a brooding, debased people dominate countless yellow hordes, where the crowded squalor and weird strangeness of an unfamiliar world blend with the hazy promise of long, long dreams of joy—surely, here was forgetfulness. And here the man took up his life, tossing it into the whirl of Fate as a light thing, perhaps useful if service were

found, but unsaved and unvalued as an old glove, worn in the toil of the fields.

Among the Americans in Pekin this handsome, reckless youth from the Home land became known—and liked. Wherever the boyish face, with its square chin and grave eyes appeared, men and women turned to look;—the men at the chin, the women at the eyes. And the man never knew of the long glances that followed his broad, lithe shoulders as they moved through the crowd of some American-English function, nor of the thoughts that softened many a pair of dreaming eyes. Nor would he have cared if he had seen these things, for dreams call only unto dreams, and from his own eyes the dreaming was gone.

Very quickly he won his way into the hearts of his own kind there,—the little outpost flung by his brave young nation over the seas and the weary plains into the sullen hostility of the mystery of Asia. More than one of this colony were searching with the newly come man for the fairy gold of Forgetfulness, and behind other eyes than his lurked the pain, deadened and nearly concealed by strong nerve and stronger will, of the things that had left them forever,—the ashes of dead memories.

To forget one must work, and work soon came. The eyes that held the memories were trained to judge keenly as they were quick to know the real from the imitation, and as they marked this Soldier of the Search, their verdict

gave him his valuation, for they said, "Surely, here is a Man." And so, before the close, vaporous summer of the Orient had fully begun its siege on the Pekin Walls, the man became one of several in the general offices of John Morton, international broker. And as the ability and forcefulness that backed up the square chin and dark smouldering eyes showed itself from the first hours of the work, the height of the summer saw the man one of few, seated at his own desk in the inner and motive office—the throne room of John Morton. Little by little the grizzled veteran of Chinese trade, the man whose financial brain had made the name of Morton mean financial power to every speaker of the European languages in Commer-

cial China, learned to lean more and more on the broad shoulders that daily bent over his business across the room from him, and to trust to the grasp and drive of the young American.

Quite naturally it happened, but only those that knew how the man had worked foresaw it. When the little cool breezes of early fall fluttered against the great hot walls, a new name appeared on the black and gold sign over the big office window, and many came and slapped the man on the back and asked him to drink. The man always thanked such friendly ones, and always accepted the invitations, but with such a quiet, almost stern face that some wondered if they had not offended him. But the man went

on the same—courteous, quiet and unsmiling; only now he worked harder than before.

At times John Morton, leaning back in his chair while his mind was busy on some scheme or tangle, would glance over at the man; and at these times he often smiled, and nodded his massive gray head in decisive jerks. And then his eyes would half close and he was back with his plans, but feeling around his crusty, commercial heart a strange warmth, because he knew there was another who was making those plans his own; cherishing them and working for their success with all the force and much of the skill that was possessed by the great head of the firm himself, and with the fresh young vitality that

the older man could never have again. Unknown, mysterious, this Searcher had come into his life and his business—and now he was his partner, because in the way the man handled himself and his work, the absolute indifference to all else, there had been something that called to John Morton as to a brother spirit—and with a resistless voice. For in these signs of brain and the power to apply it he saw what he had striven to acquire himself—and succeeded. And if those outside wondered to behold a strange, almost boyish man taken into the inner chamber of old “Freeze” Morton’s heart and substance, it was because they *were* outside.

Month after month went by and the

man worked on, always searching after forgetfulness. But the heart is stronger than the mind, and on some days there would come between the dark eyes and the papers littered on the desk a face, framed in fair, wavy hair; and then the afternoon sun, slanting through the high ground-glass windows, would show the man's square jaw set like a vice, and the man's eyes black and strained with misery. And the face would slowly fade away. On such days John Morton, snapping out some question, would half rise from his seat at the quick glare and savage answer flung back at him; only to relax, with the sign of a grim smile around the hard old mouth, for this was a man after his own soul.

And then, when the busy winter was beginning to clarify the city and stir it into quicker life,—when every morning was cool and sharp and every night was clear and fresh,—the end came. One morning the respectfully amazed clerks behind the tall tables saw a strange sight. Fully three hours after opening time John Morton, whom they had always before found seated at his desk when they came in the morning, passed through their midst and into his office. And as the door slammed shut, his subordinates looked unspoken questions, for they had all noticed the face of the chief; noticed the haggard look on the dominant, set features;—noticed the heavy dark circles beneath the piercing steel-gray eyes. Before an-

other day began they knew, but now they wondered.

In the still inner office the senior partner bent over his desk, as he had bent yesterday. But while he stared at the papers under his hand, he saw only the empty chair across the room; and suddenly the proud gray head sank down against the polished wood of the half-opened desk top. Out of the office that had enclosed them for so long, the thoughts of John Morton were racing back and forth over the night he had spent. Gone were the richly severe furnishings around him, gone was the low hum of voices filtering through the closed door from the men that served him. His closed eyes were looking again at a closely cur-

tained bed, shaken with the tossing of a racked body; and his ears heard only the sharp, choking breaths that told of a man's struggle with brain fever—and the growing blackness. And burning in his eyes and his ears and his soul were the sights and sounds of that last hour just before the dawn—the final darkest hour; when he had seen the flicker come back into the glazing, haunted eyes, and had watched, unable to move a finger, the spilling of the last bitter drops of strength and will. He saw the splendid shoulders and arms, straining under the thin white silk that covered them, brush aside the startled doctor; and heard, as the tall form swayed erect in the middle of the floor, the gasping, tortured words that



had crashed through the silent room—
“On my feet, thank God!” Again he
felt himself springing to catch the
lurching body, falling with a last
squaring of the great shoulders, and a
last blaze from the black eyes—the
flare from the burned out Fire.

Very slowly and heavily John Mor-
ton rose to his feet and walked across
to the closed desk. And very slowly
he drew out his handkerchief and
flicked away the only spot on its shin-
ing top—a tiny mound of cold ashes.

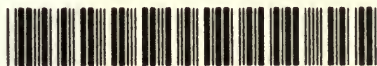


Finis



CALIFORNIA

GENERAL LIBRARY - U.C. BERKELEY



8000241934

958
1525

211003

Richardson

